Guppies Are Forever

I love everything about James Pond, it's fantastic! Well except for all that pesky water, which unfortunately enrobes you like a Guppy in the ocean. Huh, strange my mind should lunge for such an obscure simile out of the blue.

The dilemma Robocod's precursor poses is that while 99.99 ... 999 ... 999% of gamers detest the water-based interludes in platform games, this is Pond's forte. There's none of that, "we'll just knuckle down, bite the bullet and race through to the fun stuff" here because there's no light at the end of the tunnel. If you don't enjoy wrangling with floaty controls or oppressive inertia, this isn't the game for you.

It's a crying shame because there's so much good-natured wit, charisma and endearing attention to detail in which to rejoice otherwise. In fact, I'd like to propose a solution; in my daydream remake, the game would open in the usual manner with James emerging from an underwater pipe into the sea,

only then a jellyfish reaches down to the seabed and pulls out the plug, thereby draining all the water.

James loses his sea legs and assumes the immaculate control mechanics of Robocod, minus the extendo-suit, as the smaller scale level design here wouldn't really benefit from that. He'd need a new breathing mechanism of course, and the whole genocide of aquatic lifeforms issue would have to be addressed. I'd iron out those niggling quandaries later.

A full year before Mindscape's eco-friendly, bordering-on-edutainment game, Captain Planet And The Planeteers was unveiled, Chris Sorrell dished up his first foray into the James Pond series; Underwater Agent.

Waving the green conscience flag was very much the 'in thing' during the early nineties, especially where plots revolving around suave, dickiebow-wearing 'intelligent, mutated anthropomorphic mudskipper' protagonists were concerned.

As 007's soggy alter ego, it's your duty to put the kibosh on Dr Maybe's dastardly scheme to commandeer the mega-corporation Acme Oil Company and subvert its pipeline infrastructure, priming it to evacuate toxic waste into the ocean, should the world's leaders not acquiesce to his demands.

Sean Connery's looking a bit off-colour! He's probably feeling seasick.

In between juggling the precariously poised fate of the planet, you must complete twelve environmentally oriented, slightly *less* apocalyptic trials. These tend to entail fetching objects strewn around the levels and strategically placing them where they'll be most effective.

Earn points for getting drunk - it's the ultimate party game!
Remember kids, never warp on an empty stomach.

Keys are employed in 'liberating lobsters' from their death trap pots before the ruthless divers have chance to collect them. Sponges serve to plug leaking oil tankers, magic orchids can be planted next to rainforest trees to ward off lumberjacks hell-bent on chopping them down, and dynamite is rigged at the base of a refinery to blow it to kingdom come.

The latter mission is a bit of a conundrum in that you're attempting to prevent oil leakage by obliterating the offending platform; not the most subtle way to stem the flow, I would have thought. We'll just have to assume the oil would evaporate on impact and not ask too many pressing questions.

MISSION 3.
VIEW TO A SPILL!
THE ACME OIL COMPANY IS
ALLOWING OIL TO GUSH INTO THE
SEA FROM AN OLD OIL PLATFORM.
YOU MUST PLACE DYNAMITE AT THE
BASE OF THE PLATFORM TO BLOW
IT UP! YOU MUST ESCAPE IN TIME
PRESS FIRE!

99   00000000

"That game looks like a thinker!" - TheSegaStoner

Other tasks require you to guide one thing or another to safety: ickle cute pink fish at risk of mutating into fanged psychos, seals held captive by savage Eskimo dwarves, or mermaids erring perilously close to becoming the subject of unhinged scientists' next research experiment.

These forlorn Ariels are rescued with the aid of magic combs, conferring the strength to follow Pond to safety. They're not *normally* this feeble - being pickled in polluted water has sapped their energy, rendering them catatonic... at first I thought we were just brushing the hair out of their eyes so they can see where they're going. Silly me.

Bad hair day?

Finally, there are the 'marauding lager lout' stages where you're charged with placing stolen contraband in front of football hooligans wearing England flag t-shirts (who unflinchingly set about destroying them as only thugs know how), or laying toxic waste canisters in their path to knock them unconscious. I believe asking them to tie their own shoelaces or spell 'cat' would lead to the same outcome. Instant cranial implosion!

You may have spotted the same recycled sprites in Robocod where they appear as angels with wings, and hearts on their t-shirts instead of St George's Cross, proving that reform by way of noxious chemical imbibement works!

Incidentally, the Vampire Fish baddies were at one time destined to star in James Pond 4 aka 'The Curse of Count Piracula' which "was to be a fusion of platformer and Monkey Island-style puzzler" according to Chris. This was during the era of Commodore's spectacular meltdown. Enough said!

The title of each stage is an unashamedly cheesy pun inspired by one James Bond movie or another (there were already *16* to choose from by 1990!). From 'Sellafield With Love', 'For Your Fins Only!', 'The Fish With the Golden Bar', 'A View to a Spill', License to Bubble', the list goes on.

The Missions

- Mission 1: License To Bubble
- Mission 2: From Sellafield With Love
- Mission 3: A View To A Spill
- Mission 4: The Fish With The Golden Bar
- Mission 5: For Your Fins Only!
- Mission 6: Fishfingers
- Mission 7: They Only Live Once
- Mission 8: Leak And Let Die
- Mission 9: Orchids Are Forever
- Mission 10: Moneyraker
- Mission 11: The Mermaid Who Loved Me
- Mission 12: Dr Maybe

Are you a Roger Moore fan, or is Daniel Craig more your typo?

Sellafield - in case you were wondering - is a nuclear fuel reprocessing and decommissioning plant sited in Cumbria, England. Of course, ever since nuclear facilities were brought into play in 1943 for the purpose of harnessing the power of plutonium-based nuclear weapons, they have been associated with all manner of terminal health risks. In mission two (the one subtitled with the Sellafield reference), "a millpond is being polluted by radioactive waste canisters

which have been dumped in it". It's your job to rescue any surviving fish before they wind up looking like Blinky from The Simpsons (who lives in the effluent produced by Mr Burns' nuclear plant and has evolved a third eye - purely coincidental, I'm sure!).


Our lovable, limbless chum, James Pond, was developed by Vectordean Ltd and published by Millennium Interactive in 1990. Vectordean was a businessy sounding moniker plucked from the hat of random company names simply because you needed one under which to trade. It bears no cryptic significance.
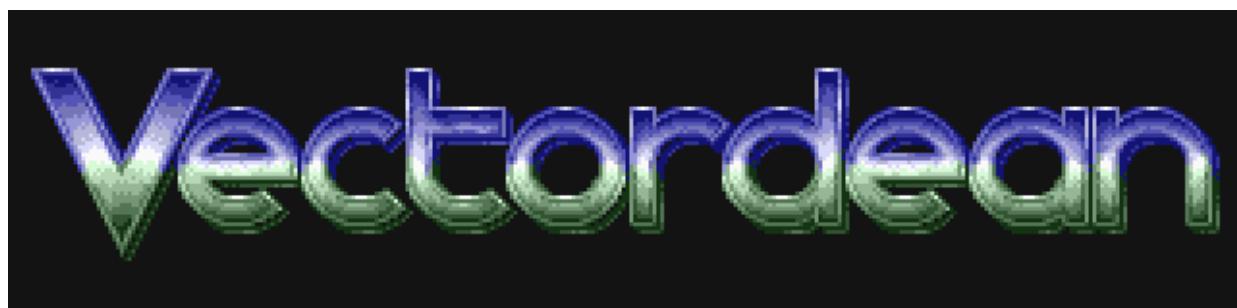
I'm struggling. One of the unpunables?

The fledgeling outfit comprised programmer Steve Bak, his friend Tim Coupe (also a programmer), and the then graphic artist programmer wannabe, Chris Sorrell.
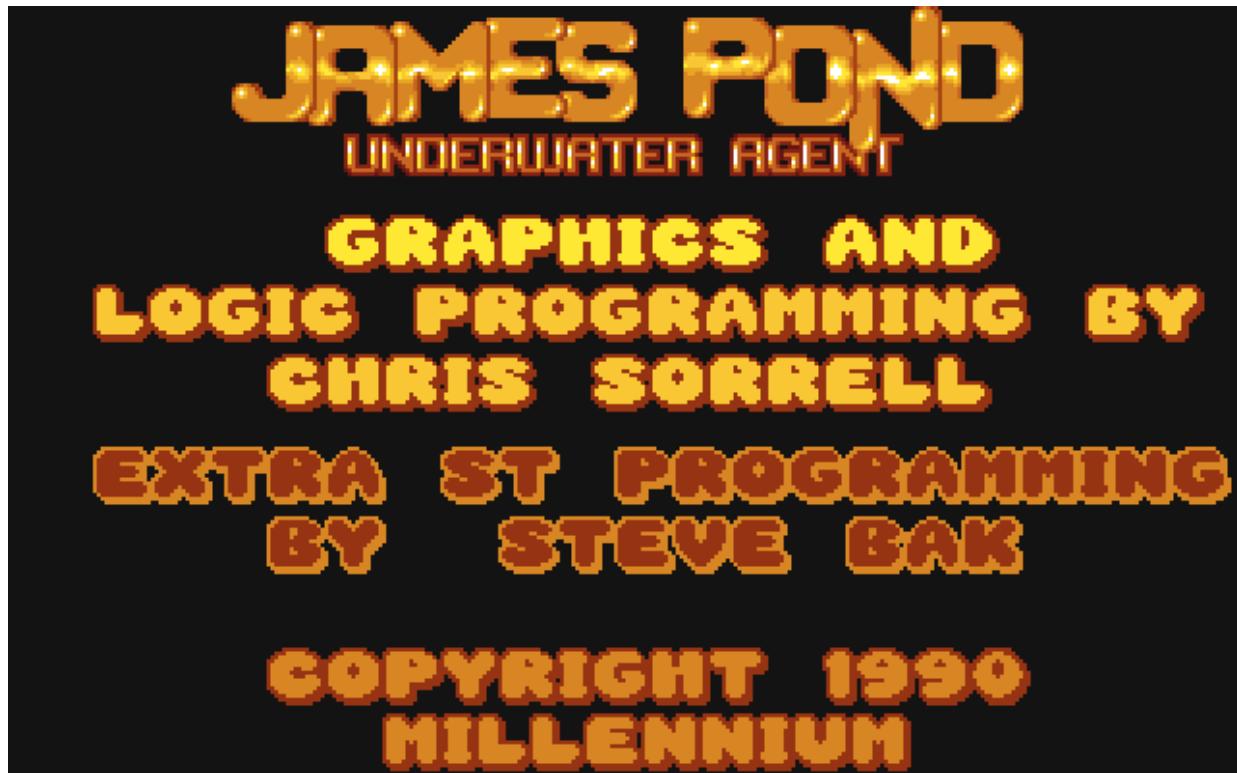
Pond was largely the result of 18-year-old Chris Sorrell's meticulous craftsmanship, only marginally supported by Steve Bak and Chris' old school friend, Nick Kenealy, who each took care of the map design using a tile editor.

The 16-bit, multi-platform game was coded on an Atari ST using Hisoft's DevPac 68k assembler, an Action Replay cartridge for debugging once development was already well underway, and Deluxe Paint to create the graphics. Graphics featuring copper effect backdrops, parallax push scrolling running at a silky-smooth 50 frames per second, 16 colour sprites, implementing Extra Half-Brite mode for the 64 colour mission briefing screens.

Check out those transparency effects! Only Amiga makes it possible.

I'll pause for a moment to allow you to gasp in astonishment … … … I'm not being sarcastic, this really *was* something to behold at the time, and still looks stunning now.

Spawned in a tatty second-floor office above a pre-loved car dealership over a period of six months, Underwater Agent was Chris' first opportunity to design and create his own game from the ground up. Previously he'd only worked on other people's concepts, ports and licensed IP, so appreciated his newfound freedom and the confidence Millennium had in his now proven abilities.

Before the puntastic, aqua-Bond rollercoaster left the station (I hope you appreciate the supreme effort I'm making to avoid fishy metaphors here), the game was known simply as 'Guppy', the species of fish the lead character was presumed

to belong to at that point. It was actually the brainwave of Millennium co-founder and managing director, Michael Hayward, to re-christen him 'James Pond', so if the gags make you do likewise, you have *him* to blame. Or perhaps Buster Comics. Agent 008.5 caught in pun-wasting shocker!

I think appreciating wordplay is something that comes more naturally to the British, so porting this kind of humour over the pond (sorry) was always going to be a gamble. Perhaps the - assumed conspicuous - secret agent homage went over the heads of most kids anyway. I'm not convinced that 007 was as popular with younger audiences as it was amongst adults, despite most of the movies being PG-rated ('parental guidance' recommended for under 12s for anyone not familiar with the British film classification system).

James Pond is one of *those* platformers. Yes, the type where anything and everything is collectable, and aside from amassing insane amounts of points, it's not immediately obvious what the, er... *point* of it all is.

Newsflash: there *is* one, and in the eminent Japanese tradition (a major inspiration for Chris), it's extra lives. These are awarded on stockpiling 100,000 points up to 500,000, after which half a million are required to score the same bonus.

Bonus collect 'em up rooms also allow you to top up your fish-o-meter health bar, though be aware that it's depleted the longer you reside in them, so you'll notice a diminishing returns effect if you hang around too long. Perhaps, an opportune moment to point out that helpful text messages (or status updates) regularly appear above your fishunculus life meter avatar. Are you familiar with the phrase, "to drink like a fish"? ;)

Keeping an eye out for pop culture reference collectables is always a fun sport to play. So far I've spotted a Rubik's Cube, Garfield, and an 'I love NY' mug. How many points are they worth in the I-Spy guide?

Take too long to explore an area and you're hounded by a buttoned-up private investigator wearing a yellow trilby and trench coat. I find it impossible to look at these without thinking of Stephen King's 'Low Men in Yellow Coats', even though they didn't feature in the Dark Tower series or his collection of short stories - Hearts in Atlantis - until long after James Pond graced our 14" screens. Just thinking out loud. I should stop that.

Individual letters found in secret rooms spelling out 'James Pond' can also be gathered up to bolster your points stash. Track down the complete set for a bonus of 10 million points, a feat you can perform up to three times per game.

Letter-harvesting isn't the only tip of the hat towards Japanese games by Taito et al you'll notice. The way Pond traps his foes inside bubbles to incapacitate and then dispatch them with a pop is plucked straight from Bubble Bobble.

Then there are the glaring echoes of Marios past. Bobbing above the surface of the water, invisible blocks can be head-butted from beneath to shake loose a range of power-ups. Once revealed these can be stood upon like any other platform.

Pipes are extensively engaged to warp between levels, and not necessarily in chronological order, whilst turtle baddies and secret areas accessed by gaps in walls abound.

Influences closer to home include Bullfrog's Flood, of which Chris was a keen advocate as he worked on his own quirky

platformer. You don't have to scrutinise James Pond too closely to spot the 'hurry-up' Ghost of Captain Bluebeard (itself a throwback to coin-ops such as Rainbow Islands) and mushroom transporter corollaries. Even Quiffy puts in a cameo appearance in the Bond parody title screen.

The physics dictating Pond's movement and the game mechanics were heavily swayed by the Commodore 64 platformer, Gribbly's Day Out devised in 1985 by Andrew Braybrook (of Rainbow Islands and Fire & Ice fame of course). You occupy the role of a levitating oversized head mounted on a foot known as Gribbly Grobbly. Your avatar as a *whole* that is - your *foot* doesn't have a name independent to yours, that would be ridiculous! The little frog-like creature is surprisingly expressive and endearing for an 8-bit sprite with few frames of animation to his repertoire.

Even continent-hopping super-spy lotharios have to start somewhere.

Navigating throughout 16 perilous landscapes set on planet Blabgor, you're required to execute a baby Gribblet reconnaissance and rescue mission, depositing the wayward critters back at their home cave, safely out of harm's way. As shocking as this may be to swallow, a mob of bothersome beasts stand in your way, though luckily for us can be vanquished by forever blowing bubbles... pretty bubbles in the air... they climb so high, almost touch the sky, then like my dreams they fade and die. Sound familiar? Also, it may just be me trying too hard to connect the dots, but the explosive mines in James Pond look uncannily like Gribblets. They *do* have eyes after all - not a trait commonly associated with leg amputating warfare technology.

On booting up the game you can immediately detect the resemblance, particularly in the floaty controls as you

traverse the flooded cavern level doing your utmost to sidestep the crabs snapping at your ankle. The latter is also known as Gribbly as it inherits the collective appellation of its attached body parts. Just to clear up any confusion. I really want to ensure you have a handle on this naming thing. It's important.

Book early to avoid disappointment. That teddy really drew the short straw!

A myriad of power-ups to aid your survival can be exploited if you know where to locate them. The goldfish bowl helmet allows you to breathe longer out of water, the top hat ensures you are less vulnerable to energy drain, magic fairies grant temporary invincibility, x-ray specs enable you to see otherwise invisible enemies, and the orbiting clamshell force field will smush anything it comes into contact with.

Certain persistent items can be dropped off at your fish tank ornament home (lodged right next to the sunken wreck of the Titanic should you require a landmark to pay him a visit!) to be stored for later use.

Near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the hot dogs go on...

Others are more ephemeral, the menagerie of dancing starfish for instance. Red ones boost your velocity, yellows max out your energy level, and the green variety cause your bubbles to rise to the surface trapping any baddies they encounter en route. The black ones should be avoided as they drag you off to places you'd rather not go for several seconds before losing their grip.

Your ultimate weapon upgrade is the space-age ray gun that confers the power to turn critters into Fillet-o-Fish instantly, bypassing the encumbrance of the intermediate bubble phase, and also supplying your only means of attack on land.

Richard Joseph's soundtrack is as contrasting as night and day, and there's not a whole lot of it, to be honest. The first

stage is accompanied by a whimsical infusion of James Bond and Mission Impossible themes, stoked with comic book intrigue and suspense. An inventive medley of twanging, plucked electric guitar, flute and a perpetually stomping kick drum beat, it perfectly compliments Pond's mock-serious tone and sense of acute purpose.

All too often this gem of a track gives way to fluffier melodies, offering light relief where none was required. The remainder of the acoustics represent a madcap carnival of spirited, fairground pipe organ music, Donald Duck quackery and choo-choo steam train tooting. It's all a bit too Magic Roundabout really; twee, repetitive, frivolous and uninspiring in other words, at least when overused as it undoubtedly is.

You could argue that given the age range of the target audience, Richard hit the nail squarely on the head - one of Beethoven's symphonies would, after all, have been overkill. It's just that having heard his sublime re-working of the Bond theme you'd rather not backtrack from those giddy heights.

The track *does* make a welcome resurgence in later missions, and the surveillance radar blips that frame the energy-draining bonus rooms adeptly convey a sense of foreboding when you're most susceptible to the grim reaper. All in all, the juxtaposition of gloom and bouncy jollification works well to break the homogeneity.

Only last year a previously unknown special edition, 1mb version of James Pond was discovered by an English Amiga Board member and shared with the community. Even Chris wasn't sure what the difference might be, so it would appear to be a later release arranged by the publisher.

Following a six-page forum debate and analysis of the code, it was established that the enhanced version has a new intro

sequence and loads all data into memory before beginning the game to minimise access times.

James Pond was also released for the Acorn Archimedes, Atari ST and SEGA Mega Drive.

The Atari ST version is a dumbed-down shadow of its former fish:-

- Transparency and various other Amiga-exclusive special effects have been culled.
- Island scene intro screen depicting Pond holding a fake shark fin has been omitted.

Well, it's fin-ders, keepers, that's what I always say.

- The same is true of the 007 parody title screen.
- Diminished playfield with larger black borders.

- Extra ST programming by Steve Bak.
- There are no mission briefing, level intro screens. I suppose you had to read the manual to know what to do.
- High score entry screen is more primitive (plain black background, environmental sprites can't be seen through outline of rotating letters).
- Level warp pipes are unlabelled.
- Sound seems tinny and weak compared to the Amiga.
- The MGM Lion - I mean Pond - roars, but no sound effects can be heard. The Amiga original sampled this directly from the genuine article much to the chagrin of MGM.
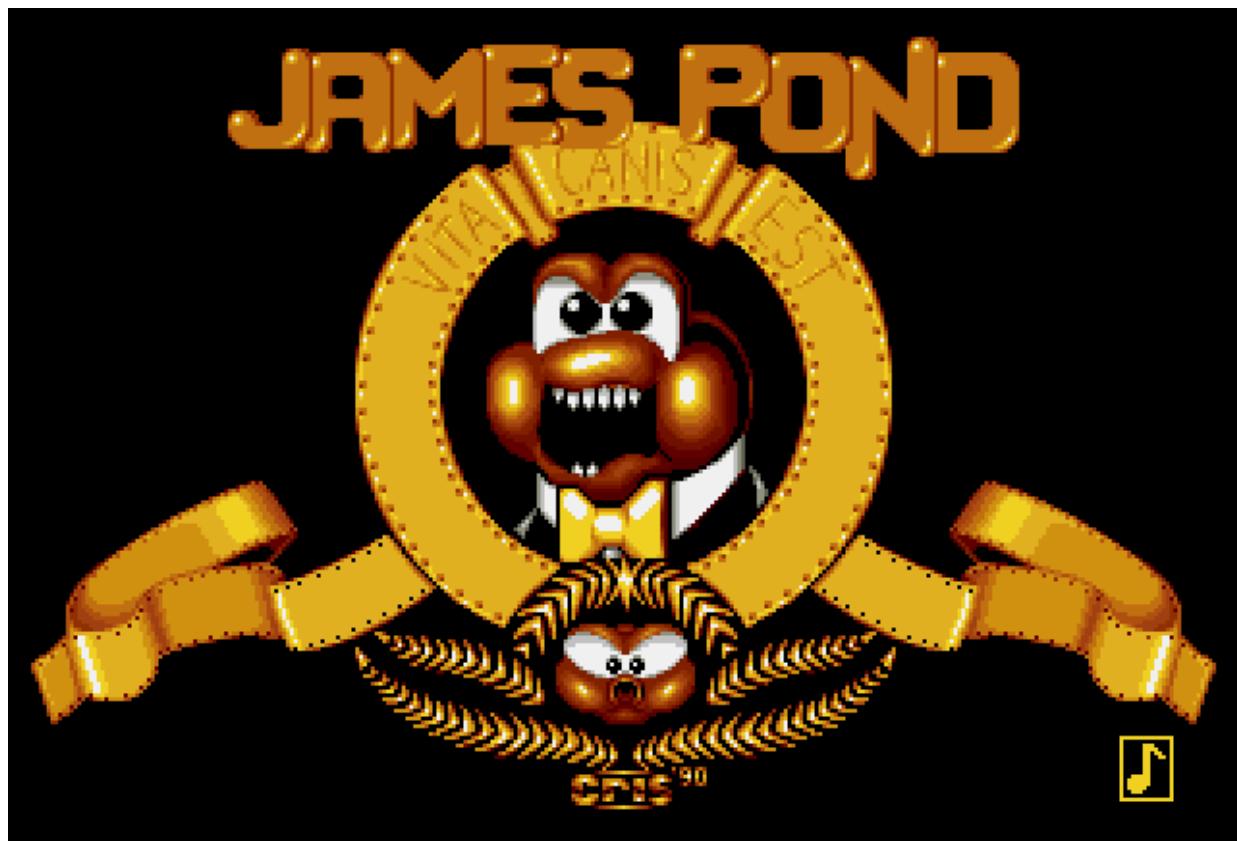
Vita canis est - it's a dog's life/life's a bitch. Take your pick.

- Sky gradients fail to blend smoothly.
- The original big box, full-price release can't be completed because a bug results in no oil leaks occurring on level 8. This was fixed for the budget edition (GBH needn't cost

you an arm and a leg!). You can also cheat your way past the glitch… if you can live with the shame! ;)

The Mega Drive version is similarly poor in terms of visual trickery, whilst the superbly drawn and animated sprites and scenery, gameplay mechanics and fun factor remain consistent between all versions:-

- Water and sky backgrounds consist of solid blocks of single colours rather than gradients/variation.
- No high score name entry rotary dial screen.
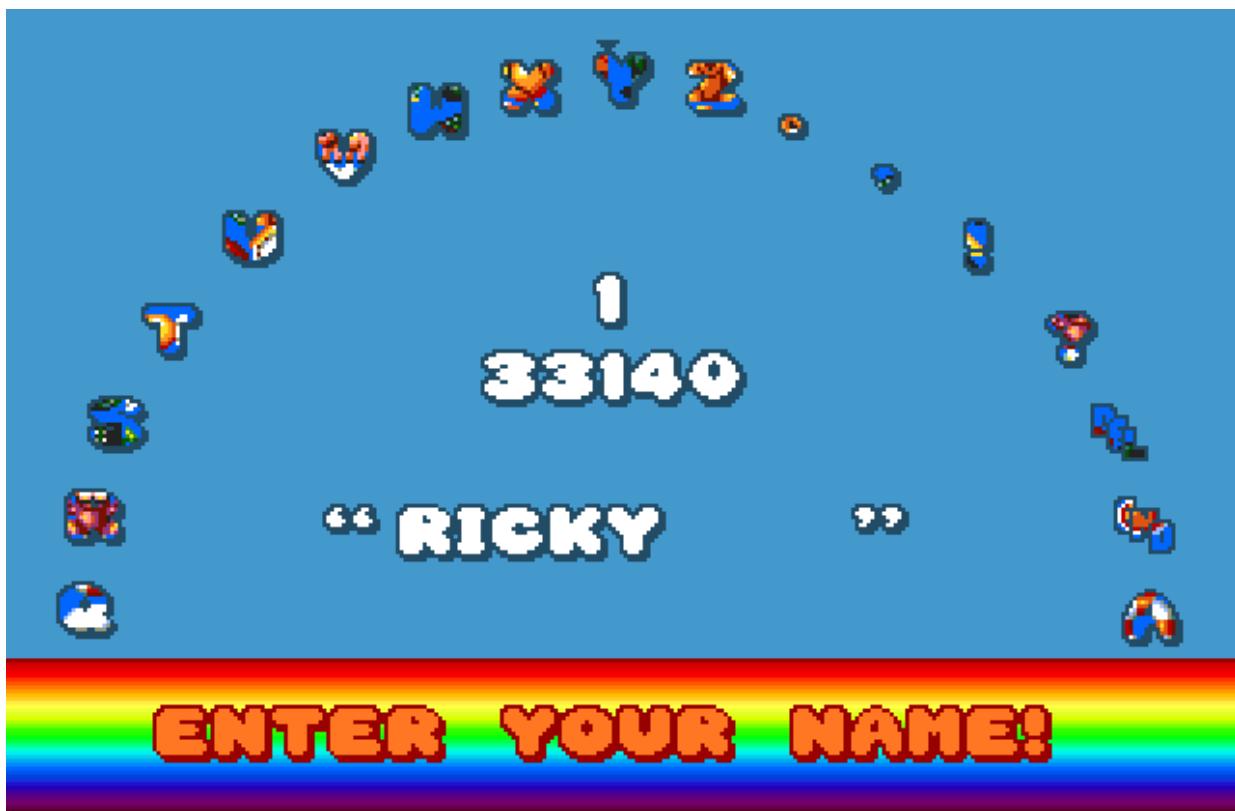
Being a super spy I suppose you'd have to consult your current passport before committing yourself.

- Mission briefs are issued via boring, static text messages rather than waved across parallax scrolling backgrounds.
- Jack Daniels whiskey bottles have been replaced with cod liver oil. Prohibition SEGA style! …yet you can still get

drunk oddly enough.

- Same music is included, though has been recomposed to better suit the Mega Drive's Yamaha YM2612 sound chip. It pales in comparison in my opinion.
- 'Marauding lager louts' have been swapped with 'beach bums', for localisation and kiddification reasons. I'm sure other countries have drunken yobs, but they're likely called something else.

The last refuge of a scoundrel or a fashion statement?

- 'From Sellafield With Love' is now 'From Three Mile Island With Love'. The original level title would have been too colloquial to Britain for foreign markets.

The Acorn Archimedes port is also no match for the Amiga.

- No in-game music, only sparse, tinny sound effects.
- Fake shark fin/island title screen has been omitted.
- By Richard Teather.
- No rainbow effect colour gradient on HUD.
- Sea and sky are solid blocks of colour rather than gradients or even multicoloured, though *does* feature rising air bubbles.
- Simplified high score entry screen, just like the ST version.

You really have to suspend your disbelief to conquer the final mission. Dr Maybe and the loopy scientist boffins are gunning for you and your brethren (or at least threatening to wave their bunsen burners in your general direction), forcing you

to stage an emergency evacuation. To sustain your family through the relocation program you must feed them *pears*.

Of all the foods in the world, *pears* are guppy's favourite? Sorry, I'm not buying it. Even apples - which are nutritionally equivalent - are *much* tastier. Then there's off the scale triple chocolate black forest gateaux. This clearly hasn't been thought through at all.

The game's completion 'sequence' is actually an anti-climactic, static 'well done' screen, followed by the high score table, though given the formidable difficulty level I suspect Chris didn't expect many people to ever see it... let alone watch it on YouTube 26 years later!

The world would never be enough for the undecided Doctor.

Trying to save the world from imminent destruction is hard enough in my vast experience of superheroism. What you really *don't* need at a troubling time like this is a horde of zombified aquatic critters getting under your fins, especially given that your health drains so rapidly upon contact.

Sometimes the levels are so densely packed there isn't room to swing a catfish, and even if you could, you haven't got the dexterity (or permission from the PDSA) to do so. Shooting fish in a barrel isn't quite so simple when you're in that barrel yourself!

Even seemingly harmless, peripheral flora and fauna have the capacity to kill you in the blink of an eye; the angry-looking flowers as opposed to the happy ones, for instance (you'd do well to monitor their Facebook status before setting out for the day). Then there are the more mobile, persistent nuisances who multiply like Gremlins, spawning from Cod knows where and into your personal sardine tin. Hmmf ...and I was doing so well to keep fish pun pie *off* the menu!

This, and the whole treading water issue are what prevent James Pond from entering the Amiga hall of fame with 'classic' honours for me.

Nevertheless, despite being harder than a rock *and* a hard place, in a diamond, James Pond was well received by the vast majority of the gaming press, sending the water world pun-o-metre hurtling into overdrive. The affection flowed, and everyone's favourite double-oh (double *bubble* technically speaking) even made Amiga Power's "All Time Top 100 Amiga Games" bible in May 1991, clocking in at number 83. Not too shabby at all for a goldfish simulator!

Luckily for us, Pond was only just finding his fins, and would go on to bigger, better and zanier adventures. All aboard for the good ship, Robocod. If Underwater Agent hasn't whetted your appetite for more, you're not right in the hammerhead.